



PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

## Versailles Police Officer Steve Sparkman

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**B**eing in the public eye is nothing new for Versailles Police Officer Steve Sparkman. The 41-year-old, former Clinch Mountain Boy spent 18 years on stage strumming his banjo, earning a Grammy and several International Bluegrass Music Association awards along the way. But in 2010, Sparkman traded one Stetson for another when he hung up his cowboy hat and donned a campaign brim instead. The Harlan County native has one daughter and is married to Carolyn, his bride of six years.

**In October, I will have worked for the Versailles Police Department** for four years. I had not worked in law enforcement anywhere else before. It was a big turnaround for me. I always wanted to be a police officer. I have always respected the trade, the people involved and the position itself.

**I worked with Dr. Ralph Stanley** in Virginia as a bluegrass musician for about 18 years. Things were slowing down on that end. Ralph was getting a little older and the business was kind of fading, you could say. I wanted to do something else. I knew what I wanted to do, it was just a matter of getting the opportunity.

**A friend of mine, Don Evans** in Lexington — Officer Don — he introduced me to a lot of the guys here in Versailles and told me if I ever got an opportunity to work here, it's the place to be. The way it's set up, the government here — it's a really good place to get a start and most people end up staying.

**I met Chief John Wilhoit** and things just kind of fell in place. I filled out an application and it went from there. It has been a great opportunity. There's a good atmosphere and great leadership.

**I went to the DOCJT academy** from November 2010 through April 2011 — I was in Class No. 422. It was a challenge. Fortunately, I was in decent physical shape, for a musician anyway, being on the road all the time. And that helped. I had prepared myself for a couple years mentally and physically for the opportunity to get into law enforcement. That way if it did come, I would be ready. And that helped, too. But it was a big change in lifestyle all around.

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**Being home every night**, after the academy of course, it took some getting used to. That was a big change. I was gone every week-end from Thursday through Sunday for 18 years. Not travelling as much and meeting different people with different lifestyles, I saw that law enforcement is like a family of its own. They were all good changes.

**Most of my family was good with me becoming an officer.** I think they were glad to see I was focused on trying to further my career instead of just sticking with music and toughing it out. My mom still says, 'Oh, please be careful!' But other than that, it's been really good.

**The best part of this job is working with people**, by far. I love to work with people and help any way I can. It makes every day worth doing and makes you look forward to the next. That's No. 1 on the list by far.

**Public relations is very important, too.** We strive here for an officer-friendly community. We want the public to know we're here to help them, to serve and protect the people and the property of Versailles and Woodford County.

**I'm assigned to patrol.** We don't have as much activity here as Lexington or Nicholasville, and that's a good thing. I love to investigate. I love to take a case from the second I get it and take it as far as I possibly can. I have the freedom here to be able to do that. That's a great tool, in my opinion.

**I mostly investigate theft cases.** We work a lot of death investigations, unfortunately, and we get to investigate those. The detectives give us a little room as far as how deep we can go into a case. I like it even more when I can find and interview suspects and actually get somewhere with the case. And that's how you learn. You can't just learn by hearsay. I love the opportunity to do that.

**We recover a lot of property** and the public is a big asset in that. People really appreciate it. We strive to also see that we stay in

contact with victims throughout the cases. We don't just take a report and forget about it until we get a call on something. We'll investigate and every turn we find, I'll notify the victims — 'Hey, this is something we've got, it may turn into something, it may not.' But it makes them feel better and assures them that we're doing everything we can to help their situation.

**I still play a little banjo** and do some session work with Ralph. Being a full-time musician professionally holds its own amount of stress. Once I got out of that and switched my focus to this, it became a stress, too. I go back to the music and they help balance each other out. So right now, I can have a bad day here and go home, maybe pick up the banjo and play a little something, and it makes for a better day.

**With this job — let's just use a traffic fatality, for example.** As hard as it is, you have to remind yourself, somebody has to be here to help these people. You have to keep that in mind and focus on the job. That's how I get through it.

**The Versailles Police Department has a great program** called Cops for Kids. Every Christmas, we raise money to take less-fortunate children shopping. We dress in our class A's, pick up those children at their homes and take them shopping. It allows them to have a Christmas when they normally wouldn't. It's all about serving. The kids are excited, obviously. You don't know what some of them have gone through, and it is amazing to see their faces.

**There are a lot of challenges out there.** Keeping the citizens on your side is always a challenge. I think that's why most agencies strive so hard to maintain that relationship — because if you lose that, you've lost everything. If you don't have the citizens to back you, it makes this job a heck of a lot harder. 🐾

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